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The Editor's Field—Vegetables in Winter

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The Editor's Field—Vegetables in Winter

To begin I should qualify “winter” so that you understand it is that which occurs in the northern hemisphere. I am aware that a portion of the globe’s population is experiencing summer even as a large percentage of the world’s population is waiting for Santa to come in a sleigh, not a four-wheeler. I spent three Christmases on Guam and, having been born in the northeast of the United States, I could not get used to going to the beach on Christmas. I digress. As I was growing up it was understood that summer vegetables were not to be had in winter. In fact, some of the worst tomatoes I have ever had were those coming from our neighborhood stores in December. This was in the middle of the last century and I can only guess from where they were obtained. Quantities were never great and they, and other summer vegetables, either were transported long distances, in an era before interstates, or grown in greenhouses. It seems that greenhouse-grown vegetables are magnitudes better now than they were then.

Over the last decade it seems that it has become normal to expect that people in most of the northern United States—take Minnesota, for example—could shovel two feet of snow from their walks, drive over still-slick roads past mounds of snow to supermarkets, trek through aisles dressed in mukluks and parkas, and reverse the process laden down with summer vegetables for salads and sweet corn for side dishes. I am not picking on Minnesota; I lived in St. Paul for 3 years and did the above.

I now live in the rural America south and have access to decent grocery stores in my town and good sized supermarkets about an hour away. I had opportunities recently to shop in the larger stores and it seems that here at the beginning of winter the variety of produce is reduced, as is the quality. To my mind it seems that there has been a regression to the middle of the last century. Why? Perhaps energy costs are partly responsible. Of late there has been a reduction in energy costs, but that might not have come at a time that would allow synchrony with growing or shipping windows. Even if vegetables from countries far from the shores of the receiving country could be shipped, I wonder how eager people are to buy with the economy in turmoil. This makes me wonder if “globalization” is suffering a set back. Good thing or bad? That depends on viewpoint.

The United States has been, and continues to be, a source of food for the world. Historically, food production has been a positive contribution to the

U.S. balance of trade. These figures are in billions, and at one time that was a significant amount of money. This means that more food leaves the United States than comes in. The vast majority is not vegetables, although vegetables do contribute. During 5 to 6 months of the year the United States imports vegetables; for the most part in the United States the very latest that significant vegetable production occurs is October. There are very southern areas within the borders of the United States where vegetables are grown during the northern hemisphere winter. I do not have complete figures, but I am willing to conjecture that the volume of these vegetables does not meet the needs of the U.S. population, and there are still transportation issues with which to contend. This time of year is when the balance of trade shifts to countries exporting food to the United States.

An attendant problem is that just because something could be shipped does not mean it should be. I had the need to purchase some watermelon recently. Remember—this is winter, northern hemisphere winter. The watermelon boxes contained fruit weighing 6 to about 12 pounds. A total of four were randomly chosen from two boxes in two stores. The boxes were marked with the country of origin. This is due to a law that has been put in force in the United States in the recent past, and that I believe is an important to being an informed consumer. All four were horrible and were thrown out. In my case in a recycling bin, but that is probably the exception rather than the norm. I realize that my expectation was probably surpassing reality, but I can guarantee that I will be forever wary of produce from the country from which the watermelons were shipped. I would suggest that perhaps we are reaching when the convents of commerce include moving substandard vegetable material from one country to another to be discarded and to charge the recipient country for discarding the substandard vegetables.

The travel of seasons is there for a reason. When winter sets in—and again I am referring to northern hemisphere winter—vegetables cannot be grown; canning allows us to have vegetables whenever we want. They are not the same as “fresh off the vine,” but even under the best of conditions, unless you grow your own, the vegetables we consume during the year are not “fresh off the vine.” They are picked at less than ripe, stored, and brought to market to meet demand when there are gaps in production. Winter is for the receiving of seed catalogues and planning for production and the consumption of frozen or canned vegetables. It is not for the consumption, or lack of consumption, of substandard vegetables.

REVIEWERS OF SUBMITTED MANUSCRIPTS

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